

THE STARITS TIMES MONDAY, JULY 26 2010

Grants for doctors to study mental illnesses, lupus

**By Cheryl Ong**

DOCTORS have known all along that schizophrenia is more than just a mental illness, but clinical research here is taking things further by finding out if the disease is linked to fat molecules in the blood.

At least \$210,000 in funds have been given to two doctors to conduct research that will help their peers better understand diseases like schizophrenia, and the mental health of the elderly. A third doctor will receive funds to research lupus.

Dr Jimmy Lee, 33, an associate consultant psychiatrist at the Institute of Mental Health, received \$180,000 from the National Medical Research Council New Investigator Grant.

His research proposal is a study into how biomarkers in the body – for example, fat molecules in the blood – are associated with schizophrenia in patients.

Dr Lee said the research defies the common perception that schizophrenia is merely a disorder of the brain. The condition usually strikes patients when they reach their teens, and is diagnosed based on what patients describe about their experiences and behaviour.

“The main challenge right now is a paradigm shift. People think it is just brain disorder, but there are studies that show the disease can manifest itself in other physical signs as well,” he said.

This means doctors may be able to use laboratory tests to diagnose schizophrenia in future, using samples – such as blood – taken from a patient.

While their study is still at an early stage, with decades to go before real world applications can be developed, Dr Lee is hopeful that his findings will help other clinical researchers better understand how the brain works, and contribute to improving the way doctors diagnose and treat schizophrenia.

Another doctor who received funding for clinical research is Dr Joanne Quah, 33. She was given \$30,800 from the SingHealth Foundation Health Services Research Grant to look into mental health among the elderly and what their perception of mental health is.

Dr Quah, who is deputy director of Outram Polyclinic and Senior Family Physician in the SingHealth Polyclinics, observed that nearly one-third of the patients she sees are aged 65 and above. She was worried that many of them may have mental health problems, but were not getting the medical attention they need.

“With the silver tsunami, there are more and more elderly people in Singapore,” she said. “It shows us how important it is to learn more about their mental health, especially since they are such a vulnerable group.”

The third doctor to get a research grant is Dr Calvin Chin, 34, a registrar in cardiology. The details of his research grant are still under discussion, but he will be studying safer ways to detect heart disease in female lupus patients.

Lupus affects the immune system, and female patients in their 40s are 10 to 20 times more likely to have coronary disease. An angiogram is the most accurate way to confirm the heart condition, but it requires a catheter to be inserted into the patient’s artery.

Dr Chin’s research will find out how non-invasive imaging techniques, like ultrasonography, can be used more accurately to detect heart problems in lupus patients.

The three doctors are part of the pioneer batch of seven students from the National University of Singapore’s Master of Clinical Investigation programme, started in 2008. They graduated earlier this month.